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DE RUEHHM #0538 1430930
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 230930Z MAY 06
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0876
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 0634
RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 0915

UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000538

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [PGOV VM](#)

SUBJECT: MENNONITES AND POLICE IN CONFRONTATION IN HCMC

REF: 05 HCMC 1182 AND PREVIOUS

11. (SBU) On May 23, political activist Do Nam Hai told us that Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang and other members of his church had been detained by local HCMC District 2 police on May 22. Radio Free Asia also broadcast an interview with Pastor Quang's wife Le Thi Phu Dung in which she alleged that police assaulted members of Quang's church as they sought to rebuild their home, which also doubles as a house church. Another RFA interviewee, Nguyen Thanh Nhan, said that Ms. Le Thi Hong Lien, another member of the "Mennonite 6" was beaten unconscious during the incident. (Note: Pastor Quang, Nhan, Lien and three others were arrested in March 2004 following a confrontation with police in district 2 near Quang's home. The imprisoned group collectively became known as the "Mennonite 6." End Note.)

12. (SBU) Later in the morning of May 23, we visited Pastor Quang's house to assess the situation and to speak with church members and neighbors. Ms. Dung said that her husband and eight other members of the church -- including Lien, Pham Ngoc Thach and Nguyen Hieu Nghia, also members of the "Mennonite 6" -- were detained following an altercation with police. The dispute arose over plans of the congregation to rebuild their home/house church. Ms. Dung gave us a copy of a "house repair permit" from ward authoritiQ that she asserted allowed them to go ahead with construction.

13. (SBU) Dung said that, on the morning of May 22, ward officials told them that the construction was illegal and ordered it removed. Pastor Quang reportedly rejoindered that they had no written order authorizing stoppage or removal of the new construction and continued with the work. That afternoon "many tens" of police came to Quang's house to remove the construction. Dung and Nhan told us initially that it was at that time that they also assaulted the church workers who were at the building site. However, after we reviewed the building permit, Dung and Nhan acknowledged that it only authorized repairs to the existing structure, not additions. They confirmed that the roofline of the new structure was raised two meters (6.5 feet) above the original structure. The new steel supports for the expanded building also had joists and hangers installed. Dung told us that metal cross beams between the joists were removed by police the previous day. Ms. Dung said that they were building an "attic for storage."

14. (SBU) Dung and Nhan said that police ordered Pastor Quang and his followers to come down from the 2nd story where they were working. They refused. Subsequently, police used ladders and electric batons to remove the workers one by one. The situation became heated. Le Thi Hong Lien came out of another portion of the house not under construction to "yell at police." Her arrest was ordered. When she refused to comply, she was carried out first by two, then by four police officers. Her face was scratched during the process, but neither Nhan nor Dung alleged to us that she was beaten or made unconscious. Nhan said that,

during the effort to remove the church members from the 2nd story, police pushed Nghia, who fell to the ground unconscious. Church members claimed that he was beaten by police with an iron bar and kicked as he was taken away. Nhan said that "even if the construction was illegal, police should have used due process to get us to remove the structure." As of COB May 23, Quang and two others remained in police custody.

15. (SBU) Comment: Prior to this incident, Pastor Quang was able to hold church services in his home with minimal interference since his amnesty release from prison in September 2005. Despite his past history of tension with HCMC officials (reftel), he sought and received permission from local authorities to repair, but not expand his home. (The area of Quang's home is zoned for major redevelopment and the city has placed a moratorium on property improvements to limit the compensation it must pay.)

16. (SBU) Comment Continued: There is little doubt that local authorities overreacted and did not follow due process. The Mennonites allegations of excessive use of force also are troubling. However, in this case, our discussions at the scene made it clear that Quang knowingly violated zoning laws and the repair permit. When challenged by local officials, he refused to comply with orders to cease construction or police orders to come down peacefully from the roof. Quang once again appears prepared to goad the easily-provoked police; it may not be coincidence that this incident occurred just as HCMC began hosting the APEC Trade Ministerial. We are urging HCMC authorities to treat Quang and his group carefully and not to make him into a martyr. There are many serious human rights or religious freedom cases in Vietnam. As it currently stands, this incident does not appear to fit into that category. End Comment.

Winnick